Dhul-Kifl and Gautama Buddha: A Cross-Cultural Narrative Inquiry into Shared Ethical Archetypes

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The figure of Dhul-Kifl in the Qur'ān has long been characterized by its aura of obscurity. Islamic tradition accepts him as a righteous servant of God, yet supplies minimal narrative detail. This absence of elaboration has historically puzzled Muslim exegetes, much as it would have puzzled early Arab audiences unfamiliar with the many prophetic traditions that emerged beyond the Arabian cultural horizon. The Qur'ān names Dhul-Kifl alongside prophets of resolute patience, yet does not specify his location, tribe, or era. That silence invites a cross-cultural reading, especially when placed in dialogue with other ascetic ethical figures known in the broader Afro-Eurasian world.

When the name Dhul-Kifl is brought into philological focus, it evokes an intriguing set of possibilities. The word *kifl* in Arabic denotes "a share," "a doubled portion," or "responsibility," and derives from the root *kafala–yakfulu*, meaning "to guarantee," "to undertake," or "to protect."[1] The Qur'ān itself uses *kifl* in the sense of reward or share. A person titled *Dhul-Kifl* could therefore be understood as "the one endowed with responsibility," or "the possessor of a noble pledge." Some Arab linguistic traditions also preserve the practice of attaching *dhū* to geographic origins or symbolic objects—such as Dhū al-Qa'dah, Dhū al-Majāz, or Dhū al-Karāʿ—though none correspond exactly to Dhul-Kifl.[2] The formulation remains plausible within Arabic naming morphology: a figure associated with a place, quality, or pledge of ethical significance. For early Arab listeners, however, such a non-tribal, non-Arab epithet could easily sound unfamiliar and thus provoke questions.

This unfamiliarity opens the speculative window through which some later Muslim thinkers proposed identifications between Dhul-Kifl and figures from outside the Near Eastern prophetic sphere, including Buddhist, Mesopotamian, and Israelite traditions. The most debated of these proposals associates Dhul-Kifl with Gautama Buddha and, by extension, the region of Kapilavastu. Although this identification remains theoretical, it gains anthropological interest when linguistic, historical, and ethical elements are considered side by side. The possibility that *kifl* echoes, however faintly, the sound of *Kapila* or *Kapilavastu* does not constitute hard evidence, yet it highlights how religious memory often travels through adaptation and phonetic reshaping, especially when transmitted into Semitic linguistic frameworks.[3] The transformation of foreign toponyms into Arabic forms is well-attested in pre-Islamic and early Islamic historiography, thus rendering the idea suggestive, even if not provable.

Geographically, the region traditionally associated with Gautama Buddha lies far beyond the world known to most early Arab communities. Kapilavastu, situated near the Himalayan foothills, would have been a distant and exotic cultural sphere to the inhabitants of Arabia. Yet by late antiquity, trade routes, monastic travelers, and caravan networks had already brought echoes of Indian asceticism into Mesopotamia and the Levant. A few centuries earlier, Buddhist monks had reached areas as far west as Persia, the Greek-speaking world, and even parts of Arabia via maritime routes.[4] It is therefore not impossible that stories of a great ascetic teacher from the east circulated in fragmentary forms, later entering the oral landscapes from which some Arab listeners derived their impressions.

Historically, the teachings associated with Gautama Buddha emphasize detachment from craving, the cultivation of moral discipline, compassion for all beings, mindfulness, and liberation from suffering. The Qur'ānic portrait of Dhul-Kifl, though sparse, presents him as a figure of patience, steadfastness, and profound moral integrity—virtues that resonate with the Buddhist ideal of *kṣānti* (forbearance). This resonance becomes even clearer when viewed through the lens of the Udāna, where the

Buddha's declaration in Udāna 8.3 affirms the existence of an "unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned," the very ground of liberation from cyclic suffering.[5] This passage articulates a metaphysical principle strikingly akin to the uncompromising unity expressed in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, which proclaims the Absolute as One, without birth, without progeny, and without likeness.[6] Though the vocabulary differs—Pāli being descriptive and phenomenological, Arabic being apophatic and theological—the impulse to articulate an absolute, unconditioned reality is shared by both traditions.

The association between Sūrat al-Tīn and the Bodhi tree further expands this web of parallels. The Qur'ān opens that sūrah with the enigmatic oath "By the fig and the olive," symbols interpreted both botanically and metaphorically. Some modern readers have drawn thematic connections between the fig (*tīn*) and the sacred ficus species under which Siddhartha attained enlightenment—the Bodhi tree, a variety of *Ficus religiosa*. While classical Muslim exegetes typically associate "the fig" with Mount Sinai, Palestine, or the general blessings of vegetation, the symbolic layering of fig species across the Mediterranean and South Asia invites reflection.[7] Both traditions invest the fig family with notions of awakening, blessing, and moral transformation. Although this connection is interpretive rather than historical, its evocative power lies in the shared arboreal symbolism of enlightenment.

In terms of ethical teaching, Gautama Buddha emphasizes the cessation of suffering by extinguishing craving through right view, right intention, and disciplined conduct. Dhul-Kifl, within Islamic memory, is portrayed as a model of unwavering commitment to justice and moral perseverance. Muslim exegetical traditions occasionally link him to a narrative in which he undertakes a difficult public responsibility, remaining patient despite trials—a thematic cousin to the Buddha's renunciation of royal privilege and his long ascetic struggle. The convergence of moral archetypes—self-discipline, compassion, renunciation, and endurance—forms a bridge enabling comparison even in the absence of shared historical frameworks.

Anthropologically, it is plausible for a single historical or semi-historical figure to be remembered differently across civilizations, reshaped by linguistic, ritual, and narrative conventions. Names often shift phonetically when carried across cultures; ethical archetypes are adapted to local values; spiritual teachings are reframed within new metaphors. A figure originating in the Indian cultural sphere, if remembered within a Near Eastern monotheistic tradition, might acquire an epithet that reflects moral responsibility rather than geographical origin. Conversely, a figure known to Arabs only through faint oral echoes could be understood in universal terms rather than ethnographic specificity. The universalizing instinct of prophetic literature—its habit of recasting exemplary humans as timeless moral teachers—encourages such transformations.

The possibility that Dhul-Kifl and Gautama Buddha represent two cultural memories of a single sage remains speculative, yet it embodies a productive way to explore interreligious continuity. Rather than insisting on identity or difference, the comparison highlights the human tendency to discover sacred exemplars across cultures and to interpret them through local linguistic and symbolic forms. If Dhul-Kifl served Arab moral imagination the way Buddha served the Indian subcontinent, the convergence lies not in historical biography but in the human search for ethical clarity.

The relative unfamiliarity of Dhul-Kifl among early Arabs thus becomes comprehensible. A righteous figure known through distant or fragmented traditions would naturally generate curiosity. The Qur'ān, by including him without elaboration, acknowledges his exemplariness without narrating his cultural origin. This silence creates space for readers across civilizations to find resonances between Dhul-Kifl's patience, the Buddha's serenity beneath the Bodhi tree, the metaphysics of the "Unborn" in the Udāna, and the radical divine unity proclaimed in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. In all these echoes, one

discerns a shared aspiration: a movement from the conditioned toward the unconditioned, from attachment toward freedom, and from fragmented identity toward the singular truth of existence.

Footnotes

1. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, entry *k-f-l*.
2. Al-Jawālīqī, *Al-Muʿarrab*, on Arabicized foreign names.
3. A. Mingana, “Transmission of Eastern Lore into Arabic Sources,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.
4. André Bareau, *Buddhism: A History*.
5. *Udāna* 8.3, translated by John D. Ireland.
6. Qur’ān 112:1–4.
7. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, commentary on Sūrat al-Tīn.

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